



The Parallel Governance Layer of the Northern Theatre

By Robin Ashby, Director General, U K Defence Forum

Analysis of Russia's northern posture typically concentrates on the military bastion centred on the Kola Peninsula and the role of the Northern Fleet in protecting the sea-based nuclear deterrent.

Yet the day-to-day control of the Arctic littoral depends on a second institutional structure operating alongside the armed forces: the Arctic network of the Border Service of the Federal Security Service (FSB).

The contemporary role of the FSB Border Service in the Arctic reflects a direct institutional lineage from the Soviet-era KGB Border Troops, which previously undertook coastal surveillance and access control functions along the Northern Sea Route.

This presence forms part of Russia's internal security and border management system rather than the Ministry of Defence command structure. The result is a dual architecture in which the Northern Fleet provides military deterrence while the FSB maintains sovereignty enforcement, surveillance and regulatory control across the Arctic coastline.

Understanding this arrangement is essential to understanding how the Russian state sustains persistent and resilient authority across a region that extends thousands of kilometres along the Northern Sea Route.

Institutional Structure and Command

Unlike the Ministry of Defence, the Federal Security Service does not operate through a government ministry headed by a civilian minister. The organisation is led by a director who reports directly to the president of the Russian Federation. The Arctic border units therefore form part of a presidential security structure rather than the regional military command associated with the Northern Fleet.

Strategic coordination between the armed forces and the security services occurs at the national level through the Security Council of the Russian Federation. As a result, the Arctic

theatre contains two parallel chains of authority: a military command structure centred on the Northern Fleet and a border-security system managed by the FSB. These structures intersect geographically across the Arctic littoral but converge institutionally only in Moscow. In effect, Russia's Arctic governance operates through two parallel chains of authority that meet only at the presidential level.

Surveillance and Control of the Northern Sea Route

The FSB's Arctic infrastructure supports Russia's assertion of authority over the Northern Sea Route and adjacent maritime areas. Border installations positioned along the Arctic littoral provide radar coverage, communications links and logistical support for patrol activity in Arctic waters.

Their primary role is not naval combat but persistent observation and regulatory control. Patrol vessels are capable of operating year-round in Arctic conditions. Patrol vessels enforce border and fisheries regulations, monitor commercial shipping and ensure compliance with the permitting system governing transit along the Northern Sea Route. They also support the protection of critical infrastructure and economic assets.

Through these functions the FSB network forms a continuous surveillance layer stretching across the Arctic coastline. A number of installations operate alongside or in close proximity to military infrastructure associated with the Northern Fleet's Arctic posture. Locations where FSB facilities sit adjacent to major Northern Fleet bases are identified in Robin Ashby, "Zashchitnyy Kupol: Russia's Protective Three-Ocean Dome along the Northern Sea Route – Redux".

Interaction with the Military Presence

Although the FSB and the armed forces operate under separate command structures, their activities inevitably intersect on the ground. Border facilities frequently sit alongside or near military airfields, ports and logistics hubs used by the Northern Fleet and associated formations. Information gathered through border surveillance systems contributes to the wider maritime awareness picture available to national authorities. During periods of heightened tension the two organisations may also coordinate operationally, particularly in areas where naval patrols and border enforcement activities overlap.

At the same time the institutional separation between the two structures reflects a long-standing feature of Russian state practice: the distinction between military defence and internal security. The FSB enforces sovereignty and monitors the frontier in peacetime, while the armed forces provide strategic deterrence and combat capability.

The Governance Layer of the Bastion System

Seen in the wider context of Russia's Arctic posture, the border service network forms the governance layer of the northern system. While the Northern Fleet protects the strategic submarine bastion and maintains regional deterrence, the FSB provides the surveillance and regulatory presence that anchors Russian authority across the Arctic littoral.

The result is a system built on three mutually reinforcing components:

- military deterrence centred on the Northern Fleet
- border security and surveillance operated by the FSB (approximately 10,000 personnel across the Arctic sector)
- administrative control of the Northern Sea Route

Together these elements sustain Russia's ability to monitor, regulate and defend its northern maritime approaches.